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ABSTRACT

In May 1990, the Republic of Latvia declared the restoration of its independence from the Soviet Union. After that declaration, many Latvians began to reform their schools' curricula and teaching methods. They replaced Soviet-era citizenship courses with new teaching materials and methods appropriate for educating the young citizens of a constitutional democracy. The Democracy Advancement Center (DAC) in Riga, Latvia, founded by Rusins Albertins of the United States, is just one of many civic education projects to emerge in the rush to reform Latvian education. Since 1993, the DAC has designed and developed materials for a new course in civic education at the upper-primary levels of school--the eighth and ninth grades. The DAC staff has been active in promoting civic education in the lower-primary grades as well. Course content stresses interaction between citizens and their constitutional government. Teaching methods emphasize active learning instead of passive reception of information. Teacher training for civic education is another critical component of the DAC's mission, and they have conducted numerous workshops and seminars for teachers in schools in Latvia since 1994. The DAC's relationships with colleagues in other countries--the United States, Poland, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, The Netherlands, and Russia--have been crucial to its success. Present and future challenges for the DAC include further promotion and development throughout Latvian Society of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective and responsible citizenship in the constitutional democracy of the Republic of Latvia. Contains 12 references. (LAP)

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Civic Education for Democracy in Latvia: The Program of the Democracy Advancement Center

by Guntars Catlaks and Valts Sarma

In May 1990, the Republic of Latvia declared the restoration of its independence and sovereignty. During and after World War II, the Soviet military occupied Latvia and forced the country into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). With the decline and demise of the Soviet Union, Latvians seized the chance to be free and restored their Constitution of 1922 as the frame of government for their democratic republic.

Origins of the Democratic Advancement Center (DAC). Knowing the close connection between well-educated citizens and democratic well being, many Latvians decided to reform the curricula and teaching methods of their schools. They quickly acted to replace Soviet-era courses on citizenship with new teaching materials and methods suitable for citizenship in a genuine constitutional democracy. And they looked to the West for help, which came initially from the World Federation of Free Latvians, an international organization that nurtured the spirit of national independence and liberty during the long and harsh Soviet occupation of their homeland.

The American Latvian Association, a component of the World Federation of Free Latvians and the largest organization of Latvians in the West, started a civic education project led by Rusins Albertins of the United States, which founded the Democracy Advancement Center (DAC) in Riga, Latvia. Financial support for the DAC was provided by the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency of the federal government of the United States of America. The DAC began its work in May 1993 under the leadership of Rusins Albertins and Anita Usacka, Professor of Law at the University of Latvia, who was the DAC's first Deputy Director. She was succeeded as Director by Guntars Catlaks, a researcher at the Latvian Institute of History and a teacher at N. Draudzina Gymnasia in Riga. Guntars Catlaks currently is President of the DAC, which in April 1995 became an officially registered independent NGO (non-governmental organization). His main assistant at the DAC is Valts Sarma, principal and teacher at Sala Primary School near Riga.

Curriculum Development at the DAC. The Democracy Advancement Center has designed and developed materials for a new course in civic education at the upper-primary levels of school–the eighth or ninth grades. Key ideas about the subject matter, teaching methods, and intended learners of the new civic education program are discussed below.

First, course content emphasizes the interactions of citizens with their constitutional government. There are lessons on the Constitution of Latvia, institutions of government, and rights and responsibilities of citizens. But civic education also involves the society in which government functions. So, there are lessons on the family, educational institutions, social groups, and the economy. In particular, the relationship of civil society to democratic governance is stressed, because there is no democratic governance if the society in general is not democratic. Finally, there are lessons on international relations, so that Latvian citizens will understand how they are connected to various regions and peoples of the world.

Second, the method of teaching emphasizes active learning instead of passive reception of information. Lessons require students to acquire and apply information and ideas rather than merely to receive and repeat them. They are challenged to use higher-level cognitive operations involved in the organization, interpretation, and evaluation of subject matter. Various kinds of group work are used to teach skills of democratic participation and decision making, such as role playing exercises, simulations, and political problem solving tasks. These active teaching methods are most compatible with the educational goal of developing knowledge and skills necessary to effective and responsible citizenship in a constitutional democracy.

Third, it is fundamentally important to emphasize civic education in the primary schools. Ideally, teaching and learning of civics begins in the earliest grades so that the child acquires a firm foundation of knowledge about democracy and citizenship. And the staff of the DAC has been involved in promoting democratic civic education in the lower-primary grades of schools. Given limited resources, however, the DAC decided that the greatest impact could be achieved by concentrating its efforts at the upper-primary level–grades eight and nine. This is the point at which a formal course in civic education could be required of all 15- and 16-year-old students and thereby expose them to the knowledge and skills of democratic citizenship before they finish compulsory schooling.

The three categories of ideas, described above, have guided the development of all curricular materials of the DAC. These materials include a (1) teacher handbook on civics, (2) student workbook on civics, and (3) textbook for ninth-grade students of civics. These materials have been used throughout Latvia in teacher education workshops and classrooms. In 1996, the civics textbook was made available to all ninth-grade students in Latvia. Developers of this civics textbook include Guntars Catlaks, Valts Sarma, Aija Tuna, Gints Apals, and Vija Rudina. An American civic educator, Professor John J. Patrick of Indiana University, served as a consultant to this textbook project with support from the United States Information Agency (USIA).

Teacher Training for Civic Education. From the beginning, the DAC staff members considered the education of teachers to be a critical component of their work. Unless teachers understand the content and pedagogy of civic education for democracy, the mission of the DAC will be unfulfilled. Thus, since 1994, the DAC has conducted more than 100 seminars and workshops for teachers in schools throughout Latvia. More than 800 teachers have participated in these programs, which are

Guntars Catlaks is President of the Democracy Advancement Center and Valts Sarma, Principal at Sala Primary School, is a member of the DAC staff.

based on the lessons and teaching methods of the teacher handbook and student workbook published by the DAC.

A complementary component of teacher training for civic education has been directed to pre-service education at colleges and universities. In 1994, a special one-semester course in civics was developed by a member of the DAC, Professor Arijs Orlovskis, for students at Liepaja Pedagogical University. In 1995, Professor Liesma Lapina of the Riga Academy of Pedagogy instituted the one-semester course in civics for students preparing to be teachers. In 1996, this course in civics for the education of teachers is being offered for the first time at Daugavpils Pedagogical College under the direction of Professor Irena Saleniece. Thus, as of 1996, civic education has become part of teacher education at three major pedagogical institutions in Latvia. The DAC will attempt to influence other teacher education institutions in Latvia to include civic education in the curriculum.

International Relations of the DAC. From the beginning, the DAC benefited from relationships with colleagues in other countries. Staff of the DAC have traveled to the United States to work with civic educators at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University directed by John J. Patrick, the Center for Civic Education directed by Charles N. Quigley, and the Council for Citizenship Education of Russell Sage College directed by Stephen Schechter. These civic education experiences for Latvians in the United States have been supported by the USIA and the United States Department of Education.

The DAC is a member of CIVITAS: An International Civic Education Exchange Program coordinated by the Center for Civic Education and funded by the United States Department of Education, with cooperation by the USIA. In particular, the American Public Affairs Officer in Riga, Phillip Ives, has been very supportive of the DAC and has facilitated its work in many valuable ways.

Since 1995, the DAC has cooperated with the Institute of Curriculum Development at Enschede, Netherlands. Using Dutch examples, teaching materials in social studies have been developed and tried out in 20 schools. Civic educators of other European countries have also cooperated with the DAC, such as Poland, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, and Russia. Finally, the DAC has participated in the PHARE Democracy Program of the Council of Europe.

Conclusion. In its short life, since 1993, the DAC has been very productive in promoting civic education for democracy in Latvia. Its mission, though well begun, is far from finished. Challenges of the present and future include further promotion and development throughout Latvian society of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective and responsible citizenship in the constitutional democracy of the Republic of Latvia.

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